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SUBJECT: A LONG TIME COMING: PROTESTANT SEMINARY OPENS IN HCMC

1. (U) In keeping with longstanding GVN promises to allow the opening of a new Protestant seminary, the leaders of the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) recently inaugurated their new Institute of Bible and Theology before a crowd numbering close to 1000 at their main HCMC church. (Classes will be held there temporarily until they receive approval for a separate campus.) The four-hour opening ceremony followed the basic outlines of a religious service, complete with hymns, prayers and sermons. The only government official to speak was a representative of the Religious Affairs Committee, who read the decision authorizing the seminary. Significantly, there was no other mention of the government during the remainder of the ceremony. None of the speakers even acknowledged the government officials who attended the ceremony during their remarks, normally common practice in Vietnam.

2. (U) The gathering was presided over by Acting SECV President Duong Thanh, a former Vice President who assumed office after the death of Reverend Pham Xuan Thieu in June 2002. Among the many other speakers was an elderly, frail, and nearly blind former Vice Director of the pre-1975 Protestant seminary in Nha Trang, who delivered a fiery 20-minute sermon in a booming voice. Those in attendance included a sprinkling of GVN and local officials, the SECV hierarchy, administrators from the seminary, and the first 50 seminarians, many of whom had yet to be formally accepted by the GVN for admission. Pastors, religious workers, and lay believers (some from distant provinces) made up the remainder of the crowd, which flowed out the main doors and down the stairs to the street. A handful of American religious workers outfitted with headphones for simultaneous interpretation were seated in the first few rows, next to a congratulatory flower wreath from the Fatherland Front.

3. (SBU) Poloff recognized a number of non-SECV-affiliated pastors in the crowd, including some who have been generally critical of the recognized church for "selling out" to the government. Most openly greeted Poloff in the aisles before and after the ceremony. They said they regarded the seminary opening as a positive step, and one that should be publicly endorsed. Most had faith in the strength of the academic program as a grooming ground for future religious leaders, but doubted the program could be kept free of GVN control. (Post note: Classes began on February 17. As of March 10, 38 of the promised 50 students were enrolled, with only ten having received the required permission from their local authorities. End note.) While Pastor Thanh drew some praise for maintaining his patience and integrity in a difficult job, the SECV itself seemed to be viewed in a much more critical light by the unaffiliated house pastors.

4. (SBU) During the lunch for 300-plus pastors/religious workers after the ceremony, several pastors with whom ConGenoffs spoke -- including those from the Central Highlands and adjacent coastal provinces -- seemed unconvinced this was a milestone in the overall context of religious freedom in Vietnam. They described the general situation as somewhat improved over past years, but still highly problematic in certain locations. Yet none could offer any firsthand accounts of harassment or oppression over the recent Christmas season. They acknowledged they had been able to celebrate the holidays with their own congregations without government interference, even if they had heard second or thirdhand of problems in some of the more sensitive areas. Some pastors said they had been required to obtain permission from their local authorities to attend this opening ceremony. Others said they had decided to come even though they had never received permission. (Post note: This inconsistency tracks with our general experience that enforcement of many -- if not most -- government regulations varies from province to province, even district to district, in the South. End note.)

5. (U) In the course catalogue for the new seminary, the English translation notes that the old Nha Trang Bible and Theological Institute was closed in December 1976 for political reasons. The original Vietnamese says that classes were simply interrupted, without giving a reason why. There is also a requirement that all seminarians study "Citizen Education." The course description in English notes that "understanding of religious policy will help students know how to lead local congregations well."

6. (SBU) Comment: The long-awaited opening of a recognized Protestant seminary is a significant step in the development of the Protestant church in southern Vietnam. That the inaugural ceremony was carried out in such a public manner, with widespread

press coverage, is not surprising -- the GVN was happy to take credit for a good news story on religious freedom. (GVN officials sat through this four-hour ceremony, even though they were openly stiffed.) The fact that "illegal" house pastors made their presence unabashedly known, were genuinely complimentary about the seminary, and warmly greeted ConGenoffs, is indicative of the complexities and inconsistencies surrounding their criticism of GVN religious policies. These house pastors agree that the opening of a Protestant seminary is a small but positive step down the long road toward SECV legitimacy in the eyes of "all believers."

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